

If you smile at me - A Reminder for Americans

From an American in China



"If you smile at me, I will understand
Cause that is something everybody everywhere does
In the same language..."

Wooden Ships (1969) by David Crosby and Stephen Stills

by Gregory Brundage

June 25, 2021 Reading the newspaper these days can be pretty intimidating. There's COVID-19 and nobody really knows how it came into being. And there's crime and violence and wars. There are real dangers and fake dangers, there are unproven accusations of all kinds being thrown around.

Saying that "crazy is the new normal" is an understatement especially in the "post-truth" era.

I'm an older fellow, sixty-four as of this writing and I've been living in one of the outer districts of Beijing for the past 12 years. I was a teacher here for 10 years, then retired but keep writing because I've also been a professional writer since 1980.

Older folks always like to look back on their youthful years and say: "Those were the good old days. Everything was better back then," and sometimes it's true, maybe usually. In the case of the world since 2019 it's definitely true. In the case of the '60s and '70s it is definitely true.

The music from the 1960s and 1970s was really incredible and a lot of young people might not know this but there's a huge amount of '60s and '70s music used in movies these days because it was and still is so incredibly excellent.

The little quote at the top of this article is from a song called "Wooden Ships" by Crosby, Stills & Nash.

It was written by David Crosby and Stephen Stills, along with Jefferson Airplane founder Paul Kantner while relaxing on Crosby's wooden ship called Mayan.

"They were looking back at the shore from their peaceful refuge, imagining if the Warfare State had finally brought about nuclear holocaust, and they could see men in radiation suits assessing survivors to determine who is fit to live."

<https://genius.com/Crosby-stills-and-nash-wooden-ships-lyrics>

The song goes on:

"I can see by your coat, my friend
You're from the other side
There's just one thing I got to know
Can you tell me please, who won?"

"Say, can I have some of your purple berries?
Yes, I've been eating them for six or seven weeks now
Haven't got sick once
Probably keep us both alive..."

Wooden Ships (1969)

It's a beautiful song really and I hope whoever is reading this will stop a moment, take a deep breath, a break from the rat-race and listen to it. It's on most music apps and a fresh song from a better time.

I'm not sure why the memory of that old song popped into my head this morning. Maybe because I was thinking of going out jogging in the park near my apartment. The park is very lovely, about six miles in circumference with small lakes and lots of flowers and trees.

When I go jogging I get to see happy families, smiling grandparents mostly going pretty slow, kids playing, parents taking a break, and breathe in all the sweet scents of nature, see the sunshine glitter through the tree leaves and so on. It's really very nice. It's always relaxed. There are also some areas for basketball and a small area with contoured hills for kids with roller-blades, a ping pong area and so on.

Chinese love their parks more than any other culture I've ever seen. In the evenings one can see all styles of music and group dancing, lots of families, teens playing soccer and couples in love. They're always peaceful. I've never seen anything disturbing in a park here.

When I'm jogging a surprising number of people smile at me. If our eyes meet, I smile at them and about 99% smile back. I haven't felt prejudice here. China has 56 ethnic groups and they're quite tolerant. It's a bit surprising sometimes really. Mongolian is one of the ethnic groups and remember Genghis Khan? Some rather difficult history there! I had a student who was of the northern Manju (Manchurian) tribe and they took over China once too. Sometimes the boys teased him but it was good natured. He was one of those super-alpha students, really great and everybody liked him.

It amazes me how well people get along here and that people do smile at me given that in the USA these days there are so many insanely violent attacks on specifically Asian Americans. It's horrific! Unbelievable! Why? Because of some big lie told by some former president that lied a lot, a huge amount? Because China is a developing country and some ridiculous politicians think by spreading fear and hate they can increase their own popularity? I don't like labeling people but that's crazy and sick. It also brings to mind another song.

"For What It's Worth" (1966)

by Buffalo Springfield

"There's something happening here
But what it is ain't exactly clear
There's a man with a gun over there
Telling me I got to beware...

**"Paranoia strikes deep
Into your life it will creep
It starts when you're always afraid
Step out of line, the man come and take you away**

“We better stop
Hey, what's that sound?
Everybody look what's going down.”

Please dear reader, stop a moment and listen to those songs if you haven't already.

Is that great music or what? There's a lot of wisdom in some of those old songs and we gotta struggle against the fear, the hate and the violence.

How? Let's start with a simple smile for the old codger jogging in the park! (Oh! How selfish!) Just joking. Let's not be so selfish, so afraid to joke and smile. Share those smiles with everyone. Bring some sunshine back even on rainy days. Then maybe we can remember an old song by Louis Armstrong...

What a Wonderful World by Louis Armstrong (1967)

“I see trees of green, red roses too
I see them bloom for me and you
And I think to myself
What a wonderful world...”

Lastly, even with a mask on you can smile. The real smiles come from the heart and can be seen in the eyes.